

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

January 21, 2010

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom sent the following letter to President Obama urging him to designate Vietnam as a “Country of Particular Concern.”

January 6, 2010

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We are writing today to respectfully ask your Administration to consider reviewing current policy regarding Vietnam. Human rights conditions in that country continue to deteriorate and the Vietnamese government has taken active steps to repress, intimidate, and imprison free speech, democracy, religious freedom, labor activists, and the lawyers who defend them. We urge the Administration to consider designating Vietnam as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 and signaling to Congress its support for quick passage of the Vietnam Human Rights Act (S. 1159/H.R. 1969). We believe these two measures will provide your Administration with the necessary tools, incentives, and funding to effectively advance U.S. interests in freedom and human rights in Vietnam.

In your inaugural address, you eloquently said that those who “cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent...are on the wrong side of history...we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.” Though the U.S. and Vietnam share a tragic history, the U.S. has extended substantial trade benefits, development assistance, and humanitarian project funding to Vietnam in recent years. The U.S. granted Vietnam Permanent Normal Trading Relations in December 2006, paving the way for Vietnam to join the World Trade Organization. Over the past three years, however, Vietnam has imprisoned dozens of dissidents and taken steps to silence dissent and ban independent religious and human rights organizations.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) and its staff have traveled to Vietnam five times since 2003, most recently in May 2009. Sadly, it is our belief that the human rights situation in Vietnam will deteriorate even more next year in advance of the 11th National Party Congress. Additional political, economic, and political incentives are needed

at this time to advance vital U.S. interests and protect human rights.

It is our belief that the CPC designation is a flexible diplomatic tool that, when used previously for Vietnam, brought about some tangible results without hindering advances on other bilateral interests. We believe it can be used now with similar results. Targeted diplomatic action, when coupled with positive political incentives and possible economic sanctions, produced real human rights improvements in Vietnam. The current policy of quiet diplomacy and increased trade has not brought about the same results.

As a senator, you worked closely with USCIRF on Vietnam. In a letter to the previous Administration, you cited numerous cases of religious freedom and human rights abuses and asked that the State Department be a “strong voice on behalf of the human rights of the Vietnamese people.”

Designating Vietnam as a CPC and signaling support for passage of the Vietnam Human Rights Act is the type of strong voice needed at this time. We hope your Administration can establish clear policies and use all available diplomatic tools to support the hopes and aspirations of the Vietnamese people for both greater freedoms and prosperity.

Sincerely yours,

Leonard Leo
Chair

cc: Kurt M. Campbell, Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs
Michael H. Posner, Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor
Samantha Power, Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights
Ambassador Jeffrey A. Bader, Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for East Asian Affairs

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USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF’s principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, contact Tom Carter, Communications Director at tcarter@uscirf.gov, or (202) 523-3257.